TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

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Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here

By Andrew Cockburn

Through much of this year, Congress has been stumbling through an exercise billed as "financial regulatory reform," purportedly dedicated to bringing law enforcement to the Wall Street Casino, not least the activity notably popular among the gamesters of the "dark markets," in the $600 trillion derivatives trading markets, which nearly brought down the whole system last year. Much of the problem derives from the fact that OTC trades are executed on a bilateral basis between dealer and customer, with no public price disclosure, at least not until well after the fact.

This state of affairs is immensely profitable to the banks, who can levy huge spreads between buy and sell prices without anyone being any the wiser, as well as extracting collateral from customers that can be put to profitable use elsewhere.

It has, therefore, been the hope of reformers and even, professedly, of the Obama administration, to enforce trading in such derivatives onto exchanges, where trading activity and pricing would be visible for all to see. That's what Congressman Barney Frank heralded for the bill, gestating in his Financial Services Committee; that's what Congressman Colin Peterson claimed for the amendment to Frank's bill that emerged from his House Agriculture Committee.

Who's winning? In early November, I asked that question of a very smart attorney, endowed with deep experience in keeping Washington safe for Wall Street. In answer, he pointed to a seven-line paragraph buried in Peterson's 26-page amendment to "HR 3795, Over-The-Counter Derivatives Markets Act of 2009," passed in a voice vote by the

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Criminal Conspiracies and Religious Violence

When Stranglers Roamed the Roads

By William Pinch

In the wake of terror against the state comes the state's ferocious response. In the United States, the attacks of September 11, 2001, engendered the Patriot Act, the Department of Homeland Security, assaults of constitutional protections such as habeas corpus, the Great War on Terror – waged by Bush and now Obama – and, of course, a wave of Islamophobic hysteria.

The attacks near the Gateway to India in Mumbai just over a year ago have had as their main institutional consequence the creation, in December 2008, of a central Indian police body, the National Investigation Agency (NIA), charged with the investigation of "terror-related offenses." This agency has wide powers and jurisdiction, including the power to bypass state police units and convene special courts. It has been bolstered by concomitant amendments to the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act that allow for (among other things) the lengthening of periods of detention without charge and filing of charges, and the introduction of new "presumption of guilt" language with respect to explosives-related cases.

Some 170 years ago, the Victorientalist imagination was gripped by the vision of a bloodthirsty cult of stranglers – Thugs, as they were called – carrying out their lethal assaults across vast stretches of India as a religious duty to Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction. The British rulers of India duly declared a virtual War on Terror, and the main proponent of the war, Captain William Sleeman, adroitly built up the threat and, with it, his bureaucratic empire.

Who were the Thugs? Were they simply members of a unified all-India cult devoted to satisfying the bloodlust of an ever-thirsty goddess, or was the religion in thug violence simply a language of expression for acts that had myriad social and economic origins? The story, set forth here by William Pinch has profound reverberations in our terror-transfixed times. As he concludes, "moments of dramatic expansion of state power are often accompanied by a demonization of criminal conspiracies as a thing of evil that need to be fought on a quasi-war footing." *Editors.*

Sitaram Pandey was on the road with his uncle, Hanuman, moving west from Awadh ("Oudh") toward Agra. It was an exciting time: he was in his mid-late teens and he had decided to enlist in his uncle's regiment. His dreams of serving in the kampanī fauj (Company Army), the most successful fighting force of its time – about which his uncle had regaled him with tales of adventure and travel – were about to come true. In fact, just being on the open road was a thrill, as Sitaram had spent his entire youth in Tiloi, a small village between Banaras and Lucknow, near Rae Bareli. New horizons were opening up for him.

Sitaram and his uncle were soon joined by three friends – Tillukdaree Gheer, Deonarain and Ramdeen. The first two were also sepoys (infantrymen) in the Company Army. The third, Ramdeen, was Deonarain's younger brother and was, like Sitaram, planning to join the regiment. Sitaram carried a dagger, and the rest wore swords; Tillukdaree Gheer also carried a blunderbuss. It is hard to imagine a more confident and cheerful group of travelers on the roads in early nineteenth-century north India.

After a few days, they met a party of musicians, who asked if their party of nine could travel with the sepoys: the roads were dangerous and there was safety in numbers. Hanuman, the acknowledged leader, agreed. He was a big man, a "jamādār," or lieutenant, in the Bengal Army and fearless – he wore a necklace of gold beads as if to dare anyone to steal it. Hanuman was happy to afford protection to the musicians. No doubt, he sa-

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Agriculture Committee the day before. Following the vote, the committee had issued a press release hailing their vote for "strengthening" regulation.

Here's how the 7-paragraph loophole was drafted by an artful lobbyist:

AMENDMENT TO THE PETERSON SUBSTITUTE FOR H.R. 3795 (a) OFFERED BY MR. PETERSON OF MINNESOTA (b) Page 21, after line 25, insert the following:

(19) by adding at the end the following:

"(50) ALTERNATIVE SWAP EXECUTION FACILITY (c) – The term 'alternative swap execution facility' means a service that facilitates (d) the execution or trading of swaps between two persons through any means of interstate commerce, but which is not a designated contract market (e), including any electronic trade execution or confirmation facility (f) or any voice brokerage facility (g)."

Now, let's see what went into this legislative sausage.

(a) Everyone agrees that the unregulated "dark markets" of Wall Street's trading in over-the-counter derivatives such as credit default swaps moved the financial crisis from major problem to total disaster. Currently, most trades in these "products" are privately negotiated on the phone, dealer to dealer. It's appallingly risky – that's why we had a multitrillion-dollar bailout. But because the dealers at major banks can quote different prices to different customers, with huge spreads between buy and sell quotes, the banks are making huge profits and want to keep it that way.

(b) Colin Peterson (D-MN) is the chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture. He is on record as asserting, "The banks run this place… It's huge, the amount they put into politics."

(c) An "alternative swap execution facility" is intended by the original drafters of the bill to be a new, fully regulated market for trading over-the-counter derivatives – a technologically enhanced version of the various futures exchanges currently operating, such as the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, where transactions and prices are open for all to see.

(d) Execution… a beautiful word. Now, the "execution" facility doesn't have to be an actual exchange. It has just been redefined as merely something that "facilitates" the execution of a swap trade.

(e) Reinforces the point that a "facility" does not have to be one of those transparent exchanges. But wasn't that what the bill is meant to make happen?

(f) In 2005, the major swaps dealers, under pressure from the New York Fed, set up an electronic "confirmation facility" to keep track of trades, which the dealers control. There is not much openness here.

(g) "Voice brokerage." This means a telephone, as used by a dealer setting prices that are not publicly disclosed. That's what the dealers were doing the last time they led our financial system over a cliff, and that's the system that is preserved by this one little paragraph.

On November 11, I reported this coup by Wall Street lobbyists on the *CounterPunch* website. My story circulated on Capitol Hill, and aroused indignation. For a brief shining moment, things began to swing the other way. In particular, the language of the loophole paragraph cited above underwent a subtle change. "Voice brokerage" and "confirmation facility" disappeared.

However, in the first weekend in December, days before it was to come before the full House for debate, the House Rules Committee posted the final version. A battle-hardened veteran of such dealings quickly passed on the somber news to me:

"It appears the forces of darkness never rest; the House Rules Committee has posted what is likely to be the new derivatives section of the House financial reform bill. The new definition of [an Alternative Swap Execution Facility] (minus the "A") appears below:

(49) SWAP EXECUTION FACILITY – The term 'swap execution facility' means a person or entity that facilitates the execution or trading of swaps between two persons through any means of interstate commerce, but which is not a designated contract market, including any electronic trade execution or voice brokerage facility."

The veteran explained the dark significance of these seemingly innocuous changes:

"This language obviously creates a rather significant loophole for voice brokers, as we discussed earlier. It is also very odd that it now says 'or trading' after 'execution.' This seems to open up the same loophole that the 'confirmation facility' language did, as the language now reads that an ASEF is a person or thing that 'facilitates the execution' of swaps – which means a telephone, a person on the other end of a telephone, or any thing else that helps a swap get traded (as opposed to actually trades it). In fact, it is broader, since now an individual can qualify as an ASEF!"

Readers who might query the relevance of such arcane issues to the world at large should reflect that such trading practices are key to the gargantuan profits of the relevant banks, in particular JP Morgan ($3 billion from derivatives in the last quarter alone).

And why did the poisoned loophole rise again from the grave in that first weekend in December? The answer is simple. After my *CounterPunch* story, reform-minded legislators squared up to the loophole and weakened its more offensive provisions. But as they eyed their campaign war chests for next year's reelection battle, their resolve weakened, and the loophole was triumphantly restored in its malign entirety. The banks run Congress, just as Rep. Peterson candidly admitted. **CP**

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vored the implicit compliment, and the musical talents of these new companions would also help to pass the time. The next three days passed pleasantly, with the usual banter of the road. But on the fourth night, Hanuman awoke to see the musicians engaged in a mysterious, late-night debate, using a language he did not understand. He immediately suspected that they were a gang of "thugs" and quietly roused his friends, instructing one to keep watch the remainder of the night. The next day, Hanuman told the musicians that his party needed to up the pace and that the musicians would, perforce, be left behind. The musicians protested and pleaded, to no avail.

Four days later, toward evening, Hanuman and company met another party, a band of twelve porters carrying bamboo pipe stems. Like the musicians, these men sought protection from the dangers of the road. In dress and language they were entirely unlike the musicians, so Hanuman acceded to their request. The next morning, however, Sitaram grew suspicious. He felt sure he recognized one of the men from the earlier party and whispered to his uncle his misgivings. Hanuman was unsure and decided to wait and see, but ordered Tillukdaree to keep watch the first night. It was the wrong decision. That night, Sitaram awoke to discover that Tillukdaree and Ramdeen were being strangled by the newcomers. Sitaram raised the alarm; Hanuman leapt up and charged at the men with sword in hand, instantly killing Tillukdaree's assailant. The remaining attackers fled, but they had managed to kill the young Ramdeen and steal Hanuman's gold necklace and Tillukdaree's gun. Tillukdaree, who had fallen asleep during his watch, was so weakened by the garroting that the party hired a cart to transport him the remainder of the journey to Agra.

The incident occurred in 1812 and was seared in Sitaram's memory. It was a disappointing start to a long and tumultuous, and largely successful military career. He would include it as part of the introductory chapter of his autobiographical reminiscences, published many years later, in the 1860s.

Sitaram and his party had, in fact, fallen in a gang of thugs (the word "thug" comes from the Hindustani "thag"). As alarming as the encounter had been, it was not entirely unexpected and by no means unheard of. The dangers of the open road were well known, as was the existence of organized thug gangs – sometimes so large as to constitute war bands – that traversed the subcontinent and thrived, especially in the unsettled frontiers between the ragged-fringe boundaries of post-Mughal "successor" states. What is noteworthy is that the episode occurred toward the beginning of a period of increased awareness of such gangs on the part of Company officials. (The English East India Company had begun as a joint-stock trading venture in 1600, with a monopoly charter from the crown. The last decades of the eighteenth century witnessed the transmutation of the Company into a massive administrative, revenue-collecting, judicial and military undertaking – in short, into a state – even as it suffered withering political attacks at home.)

Thuggee – particularly Sleeman's vision of it – was well on its way to becoming a Victorientalist obsession. This would guarantee the longevity and, to some degree, determine the future shape of the bureaucratic organism he had created.

Fifteen years after Sitaram's journey, in the late 1820s, one official, William Sleeman, would mount a masterful publicity campaign to transform the disparate attempts to deal with thuggee into a vast bureaucratic organism, eventually named the Department of Thuggee and Dacoity (from the Hindustani "dakaitī," banditry, a derivative of "dākū," bandit). By the 1840s, Sleeman was being credited with (and, sophisticated self-promoter that he was, aggressively taking credit for) having eradicated the scourge of thuggee. At this point, thuggee – particularly Sleeman's vision of it – was well on its way to becoming a Victorientalist obsession. This would guarantee the longevity and, to some degree, determine the future shape of the bureaucratic organism he had created.

All well and good. Except that Sleeman did not, in fact, eradicate thuggee, unless we take thuggee to be precisely what Sleeman claimed it was, a cult of murder committed by men in thrall to the blood-thirsty goddess Kali. Thus much depends on definitions. Unraveling this semantic, discursive knot and getting to the heart of "thuggee" – or, rather, determining whether it had a heart as such – has been the subject of much penetrating scholarly reflection. Early work, focusing on the social, political and economic context that produced and structured thug violence and crime, was done by Hiralal Gupta in the 1950s, Stewart Gordon in the late 1960s, and by Sandria Freitag in the 1970s and 80s.

With the rise of postmodernism/deconstruction in social science, attention shifted to the British representation of thuggee, so much so that a new conventional wisdom began to emerge, namely, that the thug conspiracies were simply the invention of overheated European imaginations, gripped by the image of a secret, bloodthirsty cult of assassins that seemed to embody everything mysteri-

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ous and dangerous and antinomian and demonic about India and, *inter alia*, the East. There was some truth to the postmodernist critique: much, indeed most, of the popular writing on thuggee was lurid and ridiculous. But some, even if it was lurid and ridiculous, was laced with subtle sociological and historical insights. I would place John Masters' 1952 novel *The Deceivers* – a Merchant/Ivory film in 1988 – in the latter category.

Meanwhile, as the postmodern deconstruction of thuggee was reaching center stage, a number of scholars were taking a second look at thugs in their South Asian context, prominent among them Radhika Singha, who studied thuggee and its suppression as a generator of the despotism that marked the development of British-Indian law. This opened the way to broader cultural-historical questions about the relationship between the reality and representation of thuggee, a topic taken up in earnest in two more recent and sharply contrasting studies by Martine van Woerkens and Kim Wagner. Van Woerkens' original French study was translated into English by Catherine Tihanyi and published under the title *The Strangled Traveler: Colonial Imaginings and the Thugs of India* (University of Chicago Press, 2002). Wagner's study, which first appeared as a Ph.D. dissertation under (now) Sir Christopher Bayly of Cambridge University, was published as *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); he also put together a very useful compilation of documents, literary constructions, and scholarly reflections on thuggee, under the title *Stranglers and Bandits: A Historical Anthology of Thuggee* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Thus, for quite some time, the main challenge posed by thugs has been separating imperial fact from Orientalist fiction. As Raj military history buffs well know, Sitaram, whose journey to Agra introduced this piece, is no stranger to this particular problem. His very existence has been called into question, with skeptics arguing that both Sitaram and his memoir were invented in the 1870s for use in imparting a militarily inflected Hindustani to British officers in training. Nonetheless, most historians treat Sitaram's account as authentic, and many – myself included – have turned to it, whether invented or not, as a fair representation of life in the Bengal Army before and during the Rebellion of 1857. Did thugs really attack Sitaram and his party? Did Sitaram even exist? And even if he did not, does the success of the memoir as pedagogical fiction endow it with even more historical weight? And if so, of what kind? The fact or fiction of Sitaram sits well with thuggee.

Sitaram's 1812 encounter is an appropriate introduction to thuggee for another reason: the government's decision to deal aggressively with border-crossing criminal conspiracy in the early nineteenth century stemmed in large part from the fact that many of the travelers being victimized on the roads were sepoys and sawars (cavalrymen) going to and from their homes while on furlough. Thus Sitaram's recollection of the attack, real or invented, would have resonated in official corridors. There is frequent expression of official anxiety on this score. A typical example is a note penned as late as 1853 by G. H. Chamberlain, assistant general superintendent at Meerut – evidence enough that thugs still roamed the countryside despite Sleeman's pronouncements. Chamberlain worried that one "Jye Narain Pandey," a sepoy of the 52nd Regiment, Bengal Native Infantry, had fallen victim to a gang that was operating around Cawnpore (Kanpur). The case was of particular interest because Jye Narain was remembered as "a very fine young man and able to defend himself in fair attack – in fact, he was the 'Kaleefa' [leader, from the Arabic] of the regiment, a giant in strength." To add insult to injury, the loquacious confession of a member of the gang under suspicion in Jye Narain's disappearance made proud mention of four other sepoys who had been robbed and, in all but one case, murdered during the mid-late 1840s. A more general alarm on this score had been sounded some years earlier by F. C. Smith, one of Sleeman's partners in crime (prevention) and agent to the governor general in the Saugor and Nerbudda territories in central India. In a report that was reprinted in the *Calcutta Magazine* in 1832, Smith wrote:

Thugs often received the protection of prominent landlords (to whom they conveyed a portion of the spoils as a kind of tax offering), many of them were well born, and they seemed to presume a quasi-legal right to plunder and kill those who traveled the roads.

"These sepoys the Thugs always marked as their own; and, next to the treasure carriers, the murder and robbery of these faithful servants of government was their favorite occupation: trained to danger, and confident in their own strength and courage, they are easily misled by the wily and submissive conduct of the able and intelligent Thug leaders, who are, from their infancy, practiced in the wiles and deceits requisite to deceive and allure travelers to their destruction. The approvers [those who were "turned" to provide state's evidence] have often told Captain Sleeman that the reason why they choose the native officers and sepahees [footsoldiers] of our armies, in preference to other travelers, is that they commonly carry more money and other valuable articles of property about their persons, and are, from their arms, their strength, self-confidence, and haughty bearing, more easily deceived by the feigned humility and respect of the Thugs, and led off the high roads into jungly and solitary situations, previously selected, where they are easily murdered, and their bodies disposed of. Thus, the very features of the character of this class of men, which, to an ordinary observer, would appear to be conducive to their safety in traveling, prove their bane, and facilitate their destruction."

Of equal concern to Company officials, if the threat to the Company's Indian soldiery (and treasury) weren't serious enough, was the geographic reach of the gangs they encountered, as well as their apparent links to respectable society. Thugs seemed to operate with impunity across a wide expanse of Company territory. They often received the protection of prominent landlords (to whom they conveyed a portion of the spoils as a kind of tax offering), many of them were

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well born, and they seemed to presume a quasi-legal right to plunder and kill those who traveled the roads. It almost seemed as though two parallel universes, or systems of authority, were overlapping. This comes across clearly in practically all official records on the issue, and was certainly a feature of what must be one of the very first recorded notices of thuggee in Company correspondence, a November 1794 letter from the magistrate of Saran District (northwest Bihar), Charles Boddam, to John Shore, the governor general.

In this letter, Boddam reported his discovery of an extensive network of thieves operating in his district. He described them as "a set of men called Thugs, peculiar I believe to this part of the country, who are constantly ranging about the country in search of what they term service, and their mode is as follows: they generally go unarmed, and carry with them a strong piece of cloth of a fine texture formed something like a large handkerchief; this cloth they fix round the necks of such persons as they find asleep and having fastened it with a slip knot, two men, one on each side, draw it as tight as possible, by which means the person, on whose neck it is placed, is either strangled or rendered insensible, and then they plunder him of his property, and it seldom happens that they do not murder one or two persons on each expedition." The most notorious leader of this "horrid race of people" was, according to Boddam, one Body Khan, whom he immediately arrested. After giving a fairly tame deposition, Khan requested a private interview with Boddam, during which he "laid open the whole secrets of his profession." Khan claimed that there were upwards of 900 thugs in Saran District, especially along the border with Gorakhpur, then part of the Kingdom of Awadh, and that he was able to hand over the names and addresses of these men, and proof of their crimes – providing Boddam guaranteed him, in turn, a pension of 6 rupees a month for the rest of his life. However, Khan was quite old and infirm when captured, and he died in captivity soon after the interview.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the alleged scale of the thug threat, the matter was quickly dropped. Boddam himself despaired of the severe strain that pursuing all 900 accused men would put on his skeleton staff, and Shore felt the evidence given by Khan and his accomplice was insufficient in any event to warrant such a massive undertaking – particularly one that would necessarily alienate many important landlords. He instructed Boddam to only pursue those individuals who were clearly committing crimes under the existing laws on the books regarding "dakoits." One might conclude that Shore simply didn't believe that such a widespread conspiracy could be occurring under British noses, but this is unlikely. The factor that probably prompted Shore's cautious approach was another, and in some ways similar, violent (and religiously inflected) conspiracy that the Company had been dealing with for decades, remembered in official histories as the Sanyasi and Fakir Rebellion.

"Most likely the incentive for thuggee had nothing to do with religion, but the thugs, as a means of legitimizing their acts, ascribed to them a ritual and religious meaning."

Thirteen years later, in 1807, Company officials would find themselves confronted again with deeply unsettling information concerning thug gangs, now in both south and north India (in the south they were referred to as "phansigars"). By 1809, officials began responding more aggressively. But by then, the political and military situation was much changed. The French-supported Tipu Sultan had been killed at the storming of Seringapatam (Srirangapatna) in 1799, and, consequently, the powerful southwestern state of Mysore was no longer a threat to the Company's business – and the wars against it no longer a major drain on the Company treasury. In 1803, the Mughal throne at Delhi came under direct Company control, which endowed Company rule with a firmer sense of legitimacy as protector of the Mughal emperor. By 1805, Company forces had finally prevailed militarily against the Marathas (these years were when Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington, cut his military teeth, particularly during the Battle of Assaye, which he famously described as "the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life").

Meanwhile, the costly Sanyasi and Fakir Rebellion in Bengal seemed to have petered out – a puzzling fact that can only be explained by the migration of many of the insurgents to the north-central borderland province of Bundelkhand (a future haunt of many thugs) so as to enlist in the forces of Himmat Bahadur (a.k.a. Anupgiri Gosain), a prominent if troublesome warlord of ascetic origins, who had allied himself with the Company to protect its southern flank from Maratha incursions in 1803-1805. Indeed, the demobilization and gradual immiseration of Himmat Bahadur's thousands of armed ascetic "gosains" in the decades following his death in 1804 may have been a principal factor in the uptick of organized criminal activity in this period. While some – including perhaps, assuming he is real, Sitaram's Tilluckdaree Gheer (the last name is suggestive of gosain origins) – found service in the Company Army, most simply melted into the countryside or gravitated toward sacred centers like Banaras, where their military skills and uncertain means of existence contributed to increased law and order problems for Company administrators. The violence that shook Banaras in 1809, which formed a major touchstone for subsequent British imperial assertions of ancient Hindu-Muslim enmity, is a major case in point. Many itinerant bands of ascetics would, moreover, fall back on illicit trades such as trafficking in children – which they had been involved in during the eighteenth century as well – and would be termed quasi-thugs by Sleeman and his subordinates (this intermingling of asceticism and crime is one reason thuggee looked so religious to its contemporary observers).

Despite the uptick in crime, the changed military and political conditions of the first decade of the nineteenth century meant that Company officials had a much firmer sense of their own security and, indeed, legitimacy. In fact, what they seemed to have done was transform their own subcontinental cross-border and frontier military conflicts into more manageable "domestic" law-and-order issues, the resolution of which required the evolution of new forms of police power. In any case, officials could begin pursuing the thug gangs with a greater sense of purpose and urgency, even if that pur-

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suit ended in very few convictions till the 1820s, when the use of "approver" testimony was increasingly deemed admissible in court. Wagner is especially good on all this, and draws on the extensive judicial, political and military records between 1810 and the late 1820s to come up with a general image of the thug – an image that resembles Boddam's thug of 1794. The image's most significant feature is, however, its lack of specific uniformity (e.g., not all thugs used the "rumal," or scarf/handkerchief, to effect their murders, but many did, and not all disposed of the bodies of their victims in a particular, ritualized way, though many did).

At the same time, despite the internal variety and the increasingly complex system of classification that officials devised to describe them, thugs did possess a range of shared characteristics – most notably, they professed a sense of brotherly belonging to a vast underworld and a sense of professional pride in their murderous craft (there was "honor among thugs"), they tended to prey on travelers on the roads, they were sensitive to omens, they felt compelled to murder their victims, and they tended to ritualize key practical elements of their crime and its concealment (such as the moment of strangulation, the selection of the burial ground, and the occasional dismemberment of the bodies of their victims – so as to reduce swelling from decomposition and, thereby, prevent discovery, particularly when the burial ground was rocky or shallow).

The degree to which thugs endowed their behavior with wider religious significance depends on how we, in the early twenty-first century, define religion and, importantly, on the weight we give to the evidence generated in the late 1820s and 1830s. Wagner makes a convincing case, with which van Woerkens would appear to agree, that the religious features of thug criminality emerged most clearly in conversations with Sleeman and his subordinates. Out of these conversations come increasing references to "the goddess," often named as "Bhawani," and sometimes associated with the Vindhyavasani shrine near Mirzapur. For Wagner, this tells us less about thugs as such and rather more about the "colonial encounter" in action. He is not, however, ready to jettison all discussion of religion. "Most likely," he writes, "the incentive for thuggee had nothing to do with religion, but the thugs, as a means of legitimizing their acts, ascribed [to] them a ritual and religious meaning. In practical terms, it is virtually impossible to make a distinction between religious and nonreligious acts carried out by religious people." Or, put differently: "The thugs did perform rituals and observe omens that to some extent guided their behavior while engaged in thuggee, but this was not exceptional and shows that the thugs were really quite ordinary."

Van Woerkens takes a different tack. Fully aware of the tendentious nature of Sleeman's evidence, she, nonetheless, delves deeply into it to attempt a recovery of the mental world of the thug. But whose religion are we getting? Sleeman's? The thugs'? Wagner argues that we are getting a messy and largely unreliable pastiche produced by repeated, increasingly routinized interviews, in which the potential for authorial projection by the interrogator was very great and led to a decided overemphasis on key elements of the religious culture of central and northern India, whence many of the thugs came (there are many nice methodological and theoretical asides to Carlo Ginzburg and his treatment of the demonization of a sixteenth-century agrarian fertility cult in Italy in Inquisition records).

What was the result of all the institutional effort, spilled ink (and blood), repeated interrogations, long detentions without charge, and, ultimately, widespread executions, carried out in the name of thuggee eradication?

But it's not clear that the symbolic world, evoked by van Woerkens, can be dismissed quite so easily. If thug religiosity was, as Wagner allows, "really quite ordinary" in that it reflected the fact that thugs were "religious people," then, certainly, it stands to reason that thug religion would reflect the very religious culture of the landscape that they inhabited. And van Woerkens does endeavor to evoke that regional religious culture with evidence that goes well beyond that which was generated by Sleeman and company. The result is an eclectic mixing of esoteric sufi-shakta-tantrika practices and understandings that often involved blood sacrifice in a quest for control over the body and the world – a picture that is consistent, at least in its broad brush strokes (one could quibble with the relevance of some of the evidence adduced), with much recent work on popular tantra, goddess worship, and sufi-yogi interaction in medieval and early modern India. If Wagner draws inspiration from Ginzburg's early handling of Inquisition records of the "benandanti," we might perceive in van Woerkens a preference for the Ginzburg who later embarks on a detective's search for a pan-European shamanism behind the "witches' Sabbath."

Suffice it to say that the comparison of Wagner and van Woerkens' accounts of thuggee suggests to me that, whichever view we take on the nature of violent criminal conspiracies involving murder in early nineteenth-century India, it is difficult to write its history – and it is impossible to understand the mental world of its perpetrators (and its publicists) – without reference to religion. The challenge, then, is to figure out what we mean by the term religion, and to make sure – in the interests of analytical precision – that it does not simply reflect a definition that emanates out of the normative experience of Europe and the West.

What was the result of all the institutional effort, spilled ink (and blood), repeated interrogations, long detentions without charge, and, ultimately, widespread executions, carried out in the name of thuggee eradication? It would be hard to claim that thuggee was eradicated. Records from the mid-nineteenth century continue to complain of thug activity. In fact, one reads frequent letters from district magistrates, requesting that this or that case be transferred to the Department of Thuggee and Dacoity, but the requests are as often as not (or, indeed, more often) declined. In large part, this seems to be because the Department had its hands full with a new task – reforming the captured thugs, or at least those many hundreds who had cooperated, along with their chil-

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dren, at the Jabalpur School of Arts and Manufactures. (There were, of course, recidivists. For example, I recently came across a case of a notorious poisoner who preyed upon prostitutes up and down the Gangetic Plain in the mid-1850s. He was said to be part of a group of thugs that had been given land and put on a path to reform in the 1840s.)

At the same time, or soon thereafter, the Department turned to the business of identifying whole social groups as "criminal," leading to the passage of the "Criminal Tribes Act" of 1871 (which remained on the books until 1947). The Department itself underwent a major reorganization in 1904, when it was transformed into the Central Criminal Intelligence branch of the Home Department, in part to more effectively police and combat the spread of labor and peasant unrest, violent revolutionary activity, and anti-imperial nationalism. This isn't as surprising as it may seem, given the conspicuously religious symbolism used in revolutionary circles, much of which in the 1890s and early 1900s harked back to the wildly popular literary depiction of the Sanyasi and Fakir Rebellion in the novel *Anandamatha* by the Bengali author Bankimchandra Chatterji in the early 1880s – who, it should be noted, elevated the goddess as the central icon of the movement. Thus Aurobindo Ghosh's vision of violent revolutionary conspiracy in Bengal included a Bhawani "Mandir," or temple, as a kind of training facility for insurgents. One can only imagine the trepidation this inspired in official circles. Similar anxieties occasioned the rise of the newly christened "Mahatma" Gandhi to preeminence in the nationalist movement at the Nagpur Congress in 1920, his commitment to nonviolence notwithstanding. Even though Gandhi publicly shied away from the prospect of joining any particular ascetic order, he did actively recruit ascetics; and intelligence officials trembled at the thought of those ascetics being harnessed to the Non-Cooperation movement, of becoming – as they put it – "political sadhus."

It is hardly any surprise, then, that Independent India, deeply suspicious of the centralized intelligence powers of the state, did much to dismantle or limit them in the wake of 1947. In recent years, especially in the wake of Mumbai 11/26/08, that course has begun to be reversed. Of special note is the passage of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in December 2008 and the concomitant creation of the National Investigation Agency. In ways reminiscent of the anti-thug legislation of the 1820s and '30s, the December 2008 legislation served to centralize police investigative powers, lengthen periods of detention without trial, and create provisions for the presumption of guilt in cases involving certain kinds of evidence. One wonders about the future shelf life of the new National Investigation Agency and the uses, to which it will be put once the threat of terrorism fades. (One could certainly ask similar questions of the 2001 Patriot Act and the Department of Homeland Security.)

In ways reminiscent of the anti-thug legislation of the 1820s and '30s, the December 2008 legislation served to centralize police investigative powers, lengthen periods of detention without trial, and create provisions for the presumption of guilt.

What are the broader implications of all this for the early twenty-first century? One point should be obvious: state formation – what today's more instrumentally minded policy makers call "state building" – is a long and complex process, with many unpredictable twists and turns, particularly when it comes to dealing with violent behavior by "non-state actors." The idea of the "modern" state did not appear fully formed in South Asia with the political arrival of the British, but was rather the product of decades – indeed, centuries – of administrative, police and judicial evolution, as new understandings of governance meshed, sometimes uneasily, with older patterns of authority and sovereignty. Those who work on the early modern period would insist on situating this in a much longer history, with beginnings (at the latest) in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and would probably also argue that it was not complete until well after 1857 – at least insofar as it involved the monopolization of violence by the state (what is often taken to be the *sine qua non* of the modern state). Indeed, given the changes to Indian law that were promulgated after the attack on Mumbai last November, one could argue that the process is ongoing.

A related point is that moments of dramatic expansion of state power are often accompanied by a demonization of criminal conspiracies as a thing of evil that need to be fought on a quasi-war footing. This is probably a lesson we no longer need learning, especially as the overheated "Islamophobic" quality of the rhetoric that followed in the wake of 9/11 comes into clearer focus with the luxury of temporal distance. But it is a particularly tricky problem because, as we have seen, it is difficult to understand vast criminal conspiracy in a religious world without discussion of religion. It is especially tricky when the activities of the criminals do appear, on the face of it (and then some), to be downright reprehensible. It is hard not to think of groups of men who take pride in wandering the highways and byways, strangling and plundering innocent victims, as "inhuman monsters," as G. Swinton did in 1829 (in, as Wagner notes, an important moment of judicial innovation), just as it is difficult to regard men who pilot planes into crowded skyscrapers or gun down innocents in busy train stations as anything but demonic. Similarly, it is not difficult to comprehend the demonization in the other direction, given the destruction of hundreds of thousands of lives in the name of counterterrorism. But the language of angels and demons, of good and evil, quickly gives way to a language of religion and religious conflict, and to a belief in a clash of religious civilizations; when in fact, the enemy's religion is an eclectic mix of East, Middle East and West, and the popular, fear-laden image of it is a messy pastiche produced by a long, routinized dialogue. **CP**

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The Deficit Alibi

By Serge Halimi

Once again, it's expedient for western governments and central banks to sound the alarm on debt. Expedient to raise the specter of financial failure, temporarily set aside when unimaginable sums had to be paid to rescue Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank and BNP-Paribas. Expedient to introduce the notion of profit and commercial practice in areas that had been spared. The problem of debt, exacerbated by the economic breakdown, is being used, once again, as an excuse for cuts in social security and public services.

Their political revival is gathering pace. In Germany, the deficit will amount to nearly 6.5 per cent of GDP next year (almost double the maximum, authorized under the EU stability) €24 billion ($36 billion) in additional tax breaks. The U.K. Conservatives have undertaken to decrease corporation tax. In France, the right has abolished tax on overtime, established a tax shield for unearned income, and reduced death duties since Sarkozy was elected. And it is to abolish the business tax payable to local authorities.

Conservatives were once so keen to balance the books that they could even agree to tax hikes. But over the past 30 years, they have deliberately created public deficits in order to stifle any public impulse to intervene. This policy of easy money and reduced revenue is accompanied by alarmist calls for cuts in the cost of the welfare state.

Deficits don't necessarily harm those who create them: Reagan was re-elected by a comfortable majority in 1984, despite a threefold increase in the U.S. deficit during his first term. But their successors are subject to tighter financial constraints, especially when they are suspected of being spendthrift lefties. So, in order to have some chance of getting his healthcare measures adopted, Obama had to promise that they would not increase the national debt by a single cent. Are military ventures ever subject to this kind of condition?

The French government recently reduced VAT payable in cafés and restaurants by two-thirds, a loss of $3.6 billion in tax revenue. A few weeks later, to restore the "balance," it recovered $225 million by introducing a tax on compensation paid to victims of industrial accidents. It is clearly a very promising apprentice in this game, but it still has a long way to go to catch up with Reagan, who slashed taxes on the rich and then, to reduce the deficit he had created, ordered school canteens to count ketchup as a vegetable, when assessing the nutritional value of the meals they provided for the kids.

The fiscal counterrevolution to sweep the world started in 1978 in California, where Reagan had once been governor. California's coffers are now empty (there is a $26 billion deficit), so on 17 November, the University of California, with 2,000 staff cuts to its credit, increased student tuition fees by 32 per cent. **CP**

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